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SUBJECT: TURKEY: PKK RETURNEES HEAD FOR DIYARBAKIR

REF: ANKARA 1508

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The Turkish public continues to be riveted by the saga of PKK returnees who arrived at the Habur Gate border crossing on October 19. Five of the original 34 were detained but later released. Interior Minister Atalay projects that another 100-150 returnees will arrive soon, and promises that their processing will be "more accelerated." A large convoy of Kurdish supporters is escorting the PKK "peace group" to Diyarbakir, where it hopes to present nine "demands" that include publicizing PKK Leader Ocalan's road map. The exuberant celebrations could create a public backlash, but TGS Chief of Staff General Basbug told the Ambassador he is cautiously optimistic about the process -- a key signal of support. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Late afternoon on October 20 Turkish authorities released all five of the Turkish Kurds who had been detained the previous day after their return from northern Iraq. The five were arrested by prosecutors at the Habur border gate for crimes they committed in the past: illegal demonstrations and spreading terrorist propaganda. Two of those arrested were from the Makhmour camp and three were from the PKK Hakurk Camp. The other 29 returnees reportedly refused to leave the border area without their colleagues. Initial reports indicated that the five detained returnees refused to state that they were entering Turkey to "support the democratic opening" instead insisting that they had "come to Turkey upon the call from their leadership (jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan)." After many hours of hearings by a judge called specially to the border, the five were released at around 4 p.m. October 20 when the judge decided "there is no suspicion that the detainees would try to flee." Reportedly "thousands" of cars and buses were waiting at the border to transport the returnees to Diyarbakir, and thousands of people had gathered along the route to cheer them on. The group of returnees is expected to attempt to deliver a letter to the government with an agenda for peace consisting of nine demands (listed below).

¶3. (C) Interior Minister Besir Atalay told reporters at a breakfast on October 20 that the group of returnees was just the first, and was part of the government's larger "Democratic Opening" initiative. He stated that another group of 100-150 returnees would come from Iraq in the near future and that two Ministers from the government would travel to Mosul and Erbil shortly. Atalay indicated that the processing of subsequent groups would be "more accelerated." Pro-PKK Firat News Agency reported that an additional group of returnees would come from Europe, through Istanbul, sometime between October 25 and November 1. In a conversation with the Ambassador on October 20, Chief of General Staff General Ilker Basbug said that he was

cautiously optimistic that all would go well; the Ambassador stressed our continued support for the process. Most of our interlocutors in the Southeast expressed great hope for peace, explaining that many people felt more optimistic now than they had at any time during the years of conflict.

¶4. (U) The nine demands of the PKK "peace group" are as follows (from press reports):

- The road map Ocalan created should be referred to the authorities of concern and should be made public.
- Military operations should be terminated. Peaceful and democratic ways to solve the Kurdish issue in the political sphere should be developed.
- The Kurdish identity should be protected under equal terms in the Constitution.
- We should be able to freely speak our mother tongue (Kurdish). We should be free to learn it, promote it, and live our values, our culture, and geography within our language.
- We should be able to freely name our children with Kurdish names, educate them in Kurdish, and raise them in that environment.
- We should be able to freely live our history, culture, and literature and protect them.
- We should be able to develop a democratic social organization established under our own identity. We should be able to freely engage in politics. We should be able to express ourselves freely.
- We should be able to safely live in the villages, towns, and cities of Kurdistan under sufficiently developed conditions far from the oppression of special team members,

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village guards, and the police.

-- We demand more democratization in Turkey and we would like to have a more democratic Constitution.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The government's expedited release and return of all 34 PKK-related returnees indicates a strong desire to compromise when working toward a lasting peace. While there is still much that could go wrong in the coming days, the government has cleared the biggest hurdle: getting the returnees into the country, interviewed, and released. Atalay's comments that more are coming will likely resonate strongly with Turkish Kurds in the Southeast, although the exuberant welcome of the PKK returnees will leave a sour taste in the mouth of many Turks and may create difficulties for the government. (In an October 20 discussion with us, former Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin warned that excessive celebrations would be a dangerous irritant.) General Basbug's optimistic comments seem to indicate that the military is also onboard with the process.

JEFFREY

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